

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I am privileged to take the floor after my colleague from Virginia and I am in agreement with the sentiment that he has expressed. However, I would like to speak for a moment about the second greatest refugee crisis in the world after Darfur.

Four years after the fall of Baghdad, many of the worst fears expressed at the beginning of that war have come true, as Iraq and its neighbors are in the midst of a humanitarian crisis rivaled only by the ongoing genocide in Darfur, referenced by my good friend from Virginia. Iraq has the fastest growing refugee population in the world. The United States has a responsibility to try to protect the innocent victims of massive violence wherever it can. However, having made the decision to begin a war of choice in Iraq, we have a particular responsibility to those who are suffering as a result of America's actions. Whatever one believes about the wisdom of the war or the future of the United States' engagement in Iraq, we have a responsibility to those innocent Iraqis who have been driven from their homes or fear for their lives every day.

The numbers are sobering. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees estimates 4 million Iraqis have been made refugees, 2 million of which have left for adjacent countries like Syria and Jordan. Every month, another 50,000 to 70,000 Iraqis continue to be displaced from their homes, and these figures likely underestimate the magnitude of the problem. These are the front lines of a regional humanitarian crisis, one that could easily destabilize these front line countries that neighbor Iraq and turn a humanitarian crisis into a security disaster.

For one group in particular, however, our moral responsibility is unquestionable--Iraqis who are at risk because they helped the United States. Having collaborated with the United States military, the United Nations or even with a nongovernmental organization can literally mean a death sentence at the hands of any of the many sides in this civil war. Tens of thousands of Iraqis, who worked as translators, drivers, even construction workers, live every day in fear of being targeted. However, the United States is only allowing 50 Iraqi translators to start their lives over in the United States. Over the next few months, that may be raised to 500, a number that is still dwarfed by the need.

I became acutely aware of this problem working with a local high school in Portland who were

partnering with members of the Oregon National Guard who had served in Iraq who were trying to bring their translator to the United States to save her life but kept running into bureaucratic hurdles. Since then, I've heard the same story over and over again.

We should keep faith with those who have served alongside our brave men and women in uniform. This is a basic moral responsibility and a simple issue of fairness. Yet in March, the United States admitted only 11 Iraqi refugees. Since the war began, we have admitted only 700--remember, out of 4 million displaced.

I am introducing legislation this week, the Responsibility to Iraqi Refugees Act, to address this ongoing humanitarian crisis to use all of the tools at our disposal, admitting refugees, providing assistance to the region, and using diplomacy to ensure their well-being. It creates a program to admit to the United States Iraqis who are at risk because they helped coalition or reconstruction efforts. It establishes a special coordinator for Iraqi refugees and internally displaced people and requires the United States to develop plans to ensure the well-being and safety of these Iraqi refugees. Most important, it increases the number of persecuted Iraqis who can be admitted to the United States as refugees. And, finally, it would authorize additional funding for assistance to those refugees, their resettlement and fixing the bureaucratic process that often hampers even the most well-intended efforts.

I urge every Member of the House to cosponsor this broad, ambitious and comprehensive response to the Iraqi refugee crisis before it is too late, too late for the people whose only crime was working with Americans.